

## THE OPTION FOR THE POOR IN SCRIPTURE Discussion Guide

### FOUNDATIONS

*The option for the poor has solid foundations in Scripture. As Scripture scholar John R Donahue SJ says:*

*“If there is one pervasive biblical motif in both Testaments it is concern for the poor and marginal ...”<sup>1</sup>*

Let us note just a few examples.

### EXODUS

In the Exodus event God frees the people from slavery in Egypt - the God of the people of Israel is One who hears the cry of the poor and oppressed and acts to set them free. The memory of this liberation was to shape the attitude of the Israelites to widows, orphans and strangers, that is, those who were disadvantaged and vulnerable in their own society (Exod 22: 21 – 23). God called the people out of slavery into a covenant relationship, to form a new and more just society.

*This sense of God as being on the side of the poor as their protector and vindicator is also expressed frequently in the prophetic literature and in the psalms<sup>2</sup>.*

### THE BEATITUDES

New Testament scholar Brendan Byrne SJ points to this sense of God being on the side of the poor as being behind the Beatitudes:

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<sup>1</sup> Donahue SJ, J.R., “The Bible and Catholic Social Teaching” in Himes, K.R., (ed), *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, 2004, p 21.

<sup>2</sup> Byrne, B., “The Preferential Option for the Poor in the Educational Apostolate of the Society of Jesus in Australia”, unpublished paper, March 2005.

“Other things being equal, it is in no sense a ‘blessing’ to be poor and hungry and persecuted. Such states are, in themselves, evils to be avoided or eradicated. To call them ‘blessed’, which amounts to saying, ‘You’re in a good place’, only makes sense in the context of strong faith in a God who is ‘on their side’ and who, in fidelity to the biblical vision, will act and act very soon to deliver and vindicate them. Jesus pronounced the beatitudes to his disciples, conscious that faithfulness to the calling and the values which they embodied would, at times and perhaps for the most part, render them poor, hungry and persecuted in this world ... But, when such was their experience, they were to consider themselves ‘blessed’, because the God who vindicated him by raising him from the dead, would also in due course vindicate them as well ...”<sup>3</sup>

### LAZARUS & THE RICH MAN

In the parables of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16: 19 – 31) and of the rich fool (Lk 12: 13 – 21), we see that the poor are at an advantage regarding salvation because they are painfully aware of their need for God whereas wealth can give us a false sense of security.<sup>4</sup>

### THE GREAT JUDGEMENT

In Matthew’s scene of the Great Judgment (25: 31 – 46) there is just one test of whether one is to be saved or not – how one has treated the hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick and imprisoned. Jesus identifies totally with these people – what we do to them, we do to him.

### ‘BAD COMPANY’ & HEALINGS

We notice throughout the Gospels that Jesus spent time with tax collectors, public sinners, and women.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

He touched lepers and healed people considered to be suffering as a result of their own sin or that of their forebears. Jesus' healings went beyond restoring people's bodies, to restore these marginalised people to community.

Jesus spent time with and reached out to the little people, the disregarded and pushed aside.

## GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus explains his mission as bringing good news to the poor, liberty to captives, new sight to the blind and freedom to the downtrodden (Lk 4: 18 – 19).

It is difficult to read the Scriptures with open eyes and an open heart and fail to notice that God has a particular concern for the poorest, most vulnerable and most marginalised people and groups.

## AREN'T WE ALL POOR?

*Some people want to define 'poor' very broadly so that even the materially wealthy are included on account of their 'spiritual poverty'. Donahue surveys the Hebrew terms used for the poor in the Bible and rejects this overly broad usage:*

“Certain contemporary usages of ‘spiritual poverty’, which allow it to be used of extremely wealthy people who are unhappy even amid prosperity, are not faithful to the biblical tradition. ... the ‘poor’ in the Bible are almost without exception powerless people who experience economic and social deprivation”<sup>5</sup>.

We don't have to contort the concept of poverty so that it includes us - even if we are materially comfortable - in order to be assured of God's love.

God loves us all – no one is excluded.

If we love like God we will give priority in our concern to the poorest and most marginalised, to those most in need. The option for the poor suggests that answering the call to love like this could be the answer to the spiritual misery of those who are not materially poor.

## FOR REFLECTION

- Which passages of Scripture speak most strongly to you of God's special love for the poor?
- Is there a difference between being 'poor in spirit' and 'spiritual poverty'? Why might Matthew's beatitudes declare the 'poor in spirit' blessed? Could the same be said of those living in 'spiritual poverty'?
- The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is one of the passages of Scripture most often quoted in church teachings on justice in society.

Read the parable and imagine yourself in the position of the rich man.

The rich man is not given a name in the text – place your name wherever there is a reference to 'the rich man':

- What do you see, and hear?
- How do you feel?
- What can you smell?
- How does the experience taste?
- What do you want to say to God?

## FURTHER READING

*For further reflection on the Scriptural foundations of the option for the poor, see*

Donahue SJ, J.R., “The Bible and Catholic Social Teaching” in Himes, K.R., (ed), *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, 2004.

Arbuckle, G.A., *A 'Preferential Option for the Poor': Application to Catholic Health and Aged care Ministries in Australia*, Catholic Health Australia, Deakin West, 2007.

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<sup>5</sup> Donahue, op. cit., p 22.